

VZCZCXRO9154
PP RUEHHM
DE RUEHHM #0643/01 1700922

ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 190922Z JUN 07
FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2758
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 1970
RUEHVN/AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE PRIORITY 0012
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 2957

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 000643

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: EXPERIENCES OF A HARDLINE HOUSE CHURCH IN VIETNAM

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Leaders of the Inter-Evangelical Church of Vietnam, a large Protestant house church organization based in HCMC, told us that, with the exception of a recent incident in Binh Phuoc province, their operations in Southern and Central Vietnam are stable. Conditions for the IEM in the Northwest Highlands are much more difficult, particularly in the province of Dien Bien, where at least two IEM congregations have faced particularly severe harassment from local officials, including allegations of forced conversions. Another house church leader indicated that conditions elsewhere in the Northwest Highlands continue to improve modestly. While the IEM's problems mirror the experiences of other Protestant groups, the refusal of the IEM's leadership to work constructively with provincial officials creates unnecessary antagonism and slows progress.
End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On June 13 we met with Pastor Tran Mai, leader of the Inter-Evangelistic Movement Bible Church (IEM), and twelve of his subordinate pastors to discuss a religious freedom incident in the province of Binh Phuoc on June 8. Ethnic Hmong pastors from the Northwest Highlands also discussed the religious freedom challenges they face, especially in Dien Bien province.

Binh Phuoc

¶3. (SBU) Pastor Lam Cuong, IEM Pastor for Binh Phuoc Province, told us that he has been attempting to register IEM congregations with local authorities for the past year without success. However, the 1,500 followers in his area of responsibility are able to worship regularly at eleven meeting points. Every month, IEM followers in Binh Phuoc gather en masse for a prayer meeting. Pastor Cuong does not seek permission from the local authorities to hold the gatherings and they usually go on unimpeded. However, on June 8, Pastor Mai brought a group of approximately 150 IEM pastors from throughout Vietnam -- including from the Northwest Highlands -- to the Binh Phuoc prayer gathering. He conducted an ordination ceremony for new pastors at the event. The prayer service was at least one-third bigger than normal, with some 2,000 people in attendance. Local police filmed the services but did not otherwise interfere. Pastor Cuong demanded they leave but they refused.

¶4. (SBU) Pastor Cuong said that the buses carrying Pastor Mai's group back to HCMC were stopped after the ceremony and forced to drive to the local government office. Local officials wanted to question Pastor Mai and IEM Vice President Tran Long about their "evangelizing and organization of a large crowd without permission." Mai and Long replied that the authorities would have to question all 150 pastors in his entourage and then tried to bring the entire group into the local government offices. The authorities locked them out.

¶15. (SBU) After a few hours, the head of the Binh Phuoc Provincial Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) arrived from the provincial capital -- a one hour drive -- to speak with Mai. He warned that the IEM needed to request permission to hold large meetings. Pastor Mai told us he responded that they did not bother to request permission since it would not be granted and complained about the inaction on IEM's registration requests. The CRA chief offered to meet with Pastor Mai regarding pending registration requests. Mai said he would come if he is recognized officially by the province in its dealings with him as a Pastor and not as an ordinary Vietnamese citizen. The group was allowed to return to HCMC without further incident. Two AmCits accompanied Pastor Mai but remained in the buses during the six hour negotiation at the People's Committee.

¶16. (SBU) We told the IEM pastors that the fact that they are able to hold large gatherings and that the head of Binh Phuoc Province's CRA offered to meet and discuss registration are encouraging signs. Pastor Mai was dismissive, stating he would probably not meet with the Binh Phuoc Provincial CRA even if he were invited. Pastor Mai's only other complaint about obstruction of IEM operations in the HCMC Consular District was the authorities prevented IEM Christmas celebrations in Quang Ngai Province in 2006.

Harassment in the Northwest Highlands

¶17. (SBU) Pastor Do Huu, IEM's Senior pastor in northern Vietnam, and Pastors Vua A De and Vang A Tua from Dien Bien Province,

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provided an oral and written account of alleged harassment by local officials in northern Vietnam, especially in the Northwest Highlands. Pastor Huu said that older meeting points and house churches, particularly those that have been in use since before 2004, are able to hold regular services with little or no harassment. However, services at new meeting points are consistently broken up and authorities prevent new meeting points from being established. Pastors De and Huu claimed that they have shown former Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's "Instruction Number One" of February 2005 (ordering officials to facilitate Protestant house churches) to local officials to persuade them that they are allowed to gather and worship. However, commune officials seize their documents and ignore the Instruction's provisions.

¶18. (SBU) The pastors said that the situation is particularly acute in Dien Bien province. Pastor Tua, from Hang Tro village, Pu Nhi Commune, East Dien Bien District, Dien Bien Province, stated he preaches to approximately 90 people. He said that his followers have not been allowed to gather for prayer services since 2004, but they "meet secretly at night, in the fields" for prayers. Pastor Tua claimed on two occasions in 2004 and 2005, local authorities brought all of the Protestants in his commune to the village leader's home and demanded they return to their traditional beliefs.

¶19. (SBU) The IEM also provided us with a list of other incidents centered in Hang Tro village, Pu Nhi Commune, East Dien Bien District, Dien Bien Province:

-- March 15: District police banned the IEM from gathering and police pressured followers to sign a commitment stating they would not gather or follow Protestantism. Police threatened to fine each worshiper VND 250,000 (USD 16).

-- March 17: Police came to each IEM follower's home to pressure them to abandon their faith. The police reportedly said that "believing in Christ is to believe in the United States." Police confiscated religious materials from Protestant followers.

-- March 27: Commune police and authorities detained Pastor Sung Da Khua, fined him 500,000 VND (USD 31) and forced him to chop wood in lieu of cash payment.

-- April 26: Police detained Pastor Khua for six days and forced him to cut more wood. He was released after he signed a commitment that he would not hold any more gatherings in his home.

-- May 25: Two IEM followers came to visit their brother's house in the congregation's area. Police detained them and Pastor Khua for two days and fined them VND 500,000. The two followers escaped; one of them was rearrested after 14 days and the other fled to the jungle. Police reportedly punched Pastor Khua in the face during his confinement.

Harassment elsewhere in the North

¶10. (SBU) Pastor Mai also claimed that in April, police in Lac Thien village, Minh Hoa commune, Minh Hoa District, Quang Binh Province confiscated Bibles from IEM follower Dinh Xuan Sam on three occasions. Police also reportedly pressured followers to abandon their faith, noting that "Protestantism is a bad American religion." On May 20, police in Quang Phuc Commune, Tien Lang District, Haiphong City disrupted prayer services and confiscated religious materials from Pastor Tran Van Kien.

Pretending to be the ECVN

¶11. (SBU) In discussing his efforts to legalize the IEM's activities in the Northwest Highlands, Pastor Tua noted that a Voice of Vietnam radio program "in 2005" announced Protestants would be allowed to register their congregations if they were members of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN). Subsequently, Pastor Tua and a number of other IEM leaders from the Northwest Highlands traveled to Hanoi to meet with the ECVN. He said that they obtained certificates of ECVN membership for their congregations. The IEM members presented the certificates to the local officials, but the officials confiscated the certificates. Pastor Tua stated that he has met with local

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officials on a number of occasions to request to register his church, but the officials will not instruct him on how to do so.

Another View on the Northwest

¶12. (SBU) Separately, we spoke with Pastor Doan Trung Tin on June 15 to discuss the situation in the Northwest Highlands. Pastor Tin, an HCMC-based house church leader with extensive operations in the Central and Northwest Highlands has ties to both the SECV and ECVN. Pastor Tin noted some improvement in overall religious freedom conditions for ethnic minorities in the Northwest Highlands. In the past two months, the authorities have approved 20 new ECVN "meeting points" that serve ethnic Hmong. He also noted that fewer ethnic Hmong are fleeing the Northwest because of religious persecution. Other Hmong that fled to Laos have returned, noting that they had been "cheated" by those promoting the establishment of a "Hmong Kingdom" where, inter alia, they could practice their faith without official harassment. However, when they arrived in

Laos, their belongings were confiscated and they were forced to practice something other than Protestantism.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) The IEM split in two in 2006 following a leadership dispute. Pastor Mai and his branch of the IEM are among the most intransigent of the house church groups in Vietnam. In an earlier meeting with us, Mai told us that he would refuse to comply with GVN legalization and registration requirements and that "he would consider Vietnam not to have religious freedom until he could evangelize all of Vietnam's 84 million citizens." Pastor Mai briefly also joined the "8406 Bloc" dissident movement in 2006, but then resigned from the organization.

¶14. (SBU) Binh Phuoc is one of the least progressive provinces on religious freedom in the HCMC Consular district. But even in Binh Phuoc, the overall trend continues to be positive. Aside from the IEM's (unauthorized) ordination service, the group has generally not had problems with large-scale religious gatherings, despite Pastor Mai's refusal to work with the authorities. Unlike Pastor Mai, other HCMC-based house church leaders have sought a more cooperative relationship with provincial and national authorities. By and large, these groups have found that the registration process for their churches has been faster and the police scrutiny of activities more limited.

¶15. (SBU) The IEM's refusnik reputation and its decision to masquerade as the ECVN in the Northwest would do nothing to predispose the authorities in the Northwest to approve its registration requests. However, the IEM's experience in Northern Vietnam largely parallels the difficulties that the ECVN and other Protestant groups have encountered, especially in rural areas. And Dien Bien, the province in which the IEM has faced the most difficulty, is Vietnam's most retrograde province on religious freedom matters. Elsewhere in the Northwest, our contacts point to modest forward progress. If the experience of the Central Highlands is any guide, it should be possible to leverage progress in other provinces in the region to press for change even among those most resistant to change. End Comment.

WINNICK